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Credibility of government needs constant replenishing

IF the Reagan administration believed it could squander the coin of credibility without ever denting its supply, events of recent weeks should give it another view. Its actions and ensuing statements have raised enough doubts about its veracity to actually raise new doubts.

The latest trial of government's accuracy comes with the shooting down of an arms supply plane in Nicaragua. The president and the state department deny any link between that plane and the U.S. government. It had to be, they explained, the work of private groups working on their own to help the "freedom fighters." But the most likely private group, run by former Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub, said his United States Council for World Freedom knew nothing about the plane and it wasn't theirs.

The single survivor of the crashed transport, Eugene Hasenfus, formerly worked for a CIA-operated airline in Vietnam. The day her husband's plan was shot down in Nicaragua, Sally Hasenfus reportedly called the State Department to say her husband worked for the CIA. Hasenfus himself has allegedly said the same thing.

Last week former CIA director William Colby, visiting in Denver, was asked whether government's denial was to be believed. He said it was, because if the plane had been on a CIA mission, government would have said "no comment" instead of issuing a flat rejection of the charge. That tests credulity. Nobody expects the government to admit responsibility for an illegal delivery of arms to Nicaragua. And most Americans understand that CIA agents caught in the act will be disowned by the agency that hired them.

By itself, the happening in Nicaragua might not harm government credibility. But it follows on the heels of the Daniloff incident, in which an American reporter in Moscow was arrested for spying. At the time, polls showed that many Americans were dubious enough to think Nicholas Daniloff might well be a spy. The denouement of that incident was the return of Daniloff in a trade that wasn't a trade and a meeting Saturday and Sunday between the leaders of the world's superpowers that was not a summit.

Add to that the skepticism caused by the disinformation tactics the U.S. used in trying to destabilize the Libyan government of Moammar Gadhafy and a pattern of disingenuousness emerges. It could, if continued, undermine the confidence of the American people in the word of their government. State Department spokesman and former newsman Bernard Kalb quit his job over the incident, saying that "faith in the word of America is the pulsebeat of democracy." Administration response was that Kalb didn't have all the facts.

Probably so. Getting facts seems to be the problem, not just for those inside government but for the millions of Americans on the outside. So many misstatements of the truth have eaten away not at their willingness to believe but in their ability to swallow.

The most unfortunate aspect of all this is that government casts doubt on itself even when it speaks truth. Credibility is not a bottomless well. Americans rightly criticize the Soviet Union for not giving its people facts. Over time, Soviet citizens have learned not to expect them. That should not be allowed to happen here.